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Understanding RSV

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) is a common respiratory virus that usually causes mild, cold-like symptoms. For many, RSV is recoverable within a week, but RSV can be serious for some. Infants and older adults are at the highest risk for RSV complications.

Currently, RSV is on the rise and spreading at higher levels in the 2022 fall and winter seasons. The following CDC information can help you learn how RSV spreads, how to prevent the virus and when to seek care.

What Are the Symptoms of RSV?

Those infected with RSV typically show symptoms within four to six days after exposure to the virus. Symptoms can include:

- Runny nose
- Decreased appetite
- Coughing
- Sneezing
- Fever
- Wheezing

Symptoms vary depending on the stage of RSV, meaning that symptoms don't typically appear all at once. The only symptoms that may be displayed in young infants are irritability, decreased activity and breathing difficulties. Most children will experience an RSV infection by the time they are 2 years old.

While most symptoms are mild, some can be serious and lead to major health complications. RSV infections can cause bronchiolitis, an inflammation of the small airways in the lung, and pneumonia, an infection of the lungs. RSV is the most common cause of bronchiolitis and pneumonia in children younger than age 1. Older adults—especially those age 65 and older or with weakened immune systems—and infants younger than 6 months may need to be hospitalized if they are having trouble breathing or experiencing dehydration.

How Does RSV Spread?

RSV spreads quickly and is highly contagious. It can spread through droplets when someone coughs or sneezes. Additionally, RSV can live on surfaces such as counters, door knobs, hands and clothing.

People infected with RSV are usually contagious for three to eight days and may become contagious a day or two before they show signs of illness. As such, the virus can spread quickly through schools and daycare centers.

How Do I Prevent RSV?

To best prevent the spread of RSV, especially if cold-like symptoms are present, follow these CDC guidelines:

- Cover your coughs and sneezes with a tissue or your upper shirt sleeve—not your hands.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds.
- Avoid close contact, such as kissing, shaking hands, and sharing cups and eating utensils with others.
- Clean frequently touched surfaces such as doorknobs and mobile devices.

If you have an infant, ask their pediatrician if they could be considered high-risk. If you have high-risk children, abide by the following CDC guidelines:

- Avoid close contact with sick people.

- Wash the child's hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds.
- Avoid touching the child's face with unwashed hands.
- Try to limit the time the child spends in childcare centers or other contagious settings during periods of high RSV activity. This may help prevent infection and the spread of the virus during the RSV season.

How Do I Care for RSV at Home?

Mild cases of RSV can be cared for at home with the following strategies:

- Make your child as comfortable as possible.
- Allow time for recovery.
- Provide plenty of fluids. Infants may not feel like drinking, so offer them fluids in small amounts often.
- Treat a fever with acetaminophen or ibuprofen.

Be sure to contact your child's primary care provider before giving your child nonprescription cold medicines or caring for RSV at home.

When Do I Seek Professional Care for RSV?

Most cases of RSV are mild and don't require medical treatment. This, unfortunately, isn't the case for every RSV diagnosis, especially with babies and young infants. If your child is experiencing breathing problems, not drinking enough fluids, or experiencing worsening symptoms, it's important to seek medical attention immediately.

The care needed for RSV is unique to each case. If you're unsure if your child needs to seek professional care, it's best to reach out to a physician for guidance.

Conclusion

RSV can be serious for infants who catch it, so it's critical to recognize the signs of RSV. Be sure to wash your hands frequently and disinfect surfaces often this season to help prevent the spread.

For more information on RSV and if your child is high-risk, reach out to your primary physician.

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